DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 401 CS 503 402

AUTHOR McCroskey, James C.
TITLE Communication Competence and Performance: A Research and Pedagogical Perspective.
PUB DATE May 81
NOTE 9p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (Minneapolis, MN, May 21-25, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills: *Communication (Thought Transfer): Communication Research: *Communication Skills: *Definitions: *Research Methodology: Speech Communication: *Speech Instruction

ABSTRACT

Current conceptualizations of the construct of "communication competence" are examined in this paper and are found to be problematic. The paper argues that "communication competence" must be distinguished from "communication performance" and sees neither as a reliable predictor of the other. The paper suggests that both research and pedagogy must make clear distinctions among the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor elements of communication learning if they are to produce improvements in either competence or performance. (Author/FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED203401

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE:

A RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

James C. McCroskey

West Virginia University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

James C. McCroskey

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract

Current conceptualizations of the construct of "communication competence" are examined and found to be problematic. It is argued that "communication competence" must be distinguished from "communication performance." Neither is seen as a reliable predictor of the other. It is suggested that both research and pedagogy must make clear distinctions among cognitive, affective, and psychomotor elements if they are to lead to improvements in either competence or performance.

Paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention, Minneapolis, May, 1981.

CS503402

COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE:
A RESEARCH AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Federal government recently has identified five basic skills deemed essential for all children (and by implication, all adults): reading, writing, speaking, listening, and mathematics. Four of these are communication skills. To increase the probability that young people will attain these skills, the government has allocated massive funding for both research and implementation programs in these basic skills areas. State governments, for the most part, have been quick to follow the Federal lead. A new emphasis on basic skills is a contemporary fact of life.

This new emphasis on communication skills can be viewed as both a blessing and a curse. While few communication professionals would argue with the proposition that acquiring basic communication skills is a necessity for effective participation in our society, when we are confronted with the prospect of operationalizing this concern, even with potentially nearly unlimited financing from the Federal coffers, many of us are tempted to throw up our hands in despair. While most of us have been concerned with "communication competence" (not necessarily under that label) most of our professional careers, when we are asked to operationalize that concern behaviorally and provide appropriate measures of competence, the stark reality of our own limitations confronts us.

At present, there is consensus on neither the constituent definition of oral communication competence nor the operational skills which the construct represents.[1] The picture in the area of written communication is equally as bleak. While people in the area of oral communication have been moving from a traditional expressive orientation to a communication orientation over the past two decades, a similar movement is only beginning in the area of written communication. In both areas, research under the rubric of "communication competence" has barely begun.

Historical Foundations

While "communication competence" research is still in its infancy, there is a long tradition of concern with making people more competent communicators. This concern is not the unique province of contemporary times. As today, classical scholars were concerned with both the definition of competence and its operationalization. In the time of Aristotle, the concern with communication competence was the concern with rhetoric. Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in a particular case what are the available means of persuasion." The intellectual decendants of Aristotle have dominated thought concerning both oral and written communication for most of this century, and his definition of rhetoric could almost pass as a contemporary definition of "communication competence."

During the decades of the 1960's and 1970's research in rhetoric (with the rubric of the research moving from "persuasion" to "interpersonal communication" to "competence") gradually shifted toward a more empirical or behavioral orientation. Various elements were studied which were thought to be related to improving the effectiveness of a communicator. Such elements as "evidence,"[2] "self-disclosure,"[3] and "empathy"[4] became targets of concern. As a result, there is a small body of behavioral research findings which bears on the nature of effective communication. There also is a comparatively large body of research in the area of linguistic competence available.[5] Interestingly,

neither of these bodies of research seem to have had a major impact on the constituent definitions of "communication competence" advanced by contemporary writers.

CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS

The current definitions of communication competence have a dominant behavioral tone. Most representative is that provided by Larson, Backlund, Redmond and Barbour. They define communication competence as "the ability of an individual to demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate communicative behavior in a given situation."[6] The key to this definition is the demonstration of appropriate communicative behavior.[7] Clearly, having the ability to behave in the appropriate manner is not sufficient to be judged competent, the ability must be manifested behaviorally. This orientation is quite consistent with contemporary views of behavioral objectives in learning. We cannot, according to these views, claim learning has occurred unless we can observe a modification of behavior. The Larson, et. al., view, however, permits at least two types of behavior to be evidence of "knowledge of appropriate communicative behavior." One would be engaging in the behavior in the given situation. The other would be identifying appropriate and inappropriate behaviors as an observer of someone else in the situation. Thus, the Larson, et. al. definition does not mandate actual performance of the communication behavior to be judged competent.

Definitions provided by Wiemann and by Allen and Brown are even more narrowly behavioral in tone. Wiemann defines communication competence as:

> the ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviors in order that he (she) may successfully accomplish his (her) own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of his (her) fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation.[8]

This definition places the onus of communication behavior clearly on the individual to be judged. The person to be judged competent must not only know the appropriate behavior but also illustrate it in ongoing interaction. To be judged competent, in other words, the person must perform competent behaviors. Allen and Brown make this competence/performance relationship explicit: "Competence in this perspective, is tied to actual performance of the language in social situations."[9]

DEFINITIONAL PROBLEMS

It is the intent of this paper to take issue with the definition of communication competence advanced by Wiemann in favor of the definition advanced by Larson, et. al., and to deny the competence performance relationship advanced by Allen and Brown in favor of a clear distinction between the two. When arguing definitional issues one is well advised to remember the admonition of the general semanticists that meanings are in people, not in words; or as Lewis Carroll so eloquently put it through the persona of Humpty Dumpty: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less." The question of definition is one of usefullness, not correctness. Neither Wiemann nor Allen and Brown are wrong. Rather, their definitions are less useful than others that may be advanced.

The definitions advanced by Wiemann and by Allen and Brown present two major problems for both research and pedagogy: 1) the equating of competence with effectiveness and 2) the equating of competence with performance. Let us consider each in turn.

Competence and Effectiveness

The definition of competence advanced by Wiemann stresses the successful accomplishment of a person's communicative goals as a critical attribute of the competent communicator. The view taken here is that accomplishment of goals (effectiveness) is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a judgement of competence. One may be effective without being competent and one may be competent without being effective.[10] Let us illustrate.

Consider an hypothetical situation involving two hopelessly incompetent communicators who jointly purchase a basket of fried chicken at a fast-food restaurant. The basket is down to one piece of chicken left. Both of our incompetent communicators want the last piece. They talk, one gets the piece of chicken, the other doesn't. Is the one with the drumstick now competent? We could define her/him as such--the person was "effective."

Or consider the same situation but with two extremely competent communicators. There is one piece of chicken left, the two people talk, one gets the piece of chicken, the other doesn't. Is the one without the drumstick now incompetent? We could define her/him as such--the person was ineffective."

What is the point? From a behavioral perspective, use of an effectiveness or "accomplishment of goals" criterion introduces unnecessary ambiguity into our behavior observations. While observation over a large number of communication situations would allow random variation in situations and participants to cancel out variability due to constraints on effectiveness that have nothing to do with competence, and thus permit generalizations about an individual's trait-like competence level, observations of effectiveness in any given situation will be extremely unreliable estimates of competence. Clearly, competent communicators do not always accomplish their goals, nor do incompetent communicators always fail to accomplish their goals. Effectiveness as a definitional criterion of competence is not only excess baggage, it also will lead to inappropriate judgements of the competence of individuals.

Competence and Performance

The definition of communication competence provided by Wiemann implies, and the definition advanced by Allen and Brown explicitly states, that to be competent one must perform competent communication behaviors. In other words, the only way we can judge competence is by observing performance. The view taken here is that performance of behaviors judged to be competent is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for a judgement of communication competence.

The equating of competence and performance is not an original problem stemming from the communication competence literature. The areas of language development and reading have already confronted this problem and, after many years of misdirected effort, handled it. We should learn from the mistakes made in these fields. Competence and performance are not the same thing--that is to say, knowing is not equal to doing. Let us illustrate from our sister fields.

Scholars in the field of language acquisition have long known that competence and performance develop at different rates. In some cases competence develops before performance, in others the pattern is the reverse. Many studies have illustrated that children, for example, know more than they can say. If asked to point to a picture of an elephant, the child may be able to comply; but if one points to the elephant and asks the child what it is, the child may be unable to answer. In contrast, children can be taught to recite the pledge of allegiance

or the Lord's prayer long before they have any understanding of what they are reciting. One may not infer competence from performance or project performance from competence. Neither is a necessary condition for the existence of the other.

Our colleagues in the field of reading also have come belatedly to the realization that competence and performance are not necessarily related. For many years it was believed that oral reading (performance) was an excellent indicant of reading skill. It is now recognized that many children can perform (read aloud) with considerable skill without understanding virtually anything they perform while others can read to themselves with full understanding while being unable to perform (read orally). Once again, the previously assumed relationship between competence and performance was found wanting.

This lack of relationship between competence and performance can also be illustrated in the field of oral communication. We need look no further than our own experience. Some of the greatest scholars in public address are pitiful public speakers. Similarly, some of our leaders in interpersonal communication theory and research are almost totally ineffectual in their own interpersonal relations. Needless to say, some of the greatest experts in teaching are terrible teachers. In contrast, many nine-year-olds can stand before a class and speak like an "old pro" and communicate so well interpersonally that they wrap their teachers and parents around their little fingers. Clearly, knowing how does not always result in appropriate behavior and appropriate behavior is not always tied to understanding of that behavior. Equating competence and performance has been found to be a barrier to the advancement of both research and pedagogy in our sister fields. At this early stage is the time to learn from the mistakes of others and make a clear distinction between communication competence and communication performance.

Communication Competence and Communication Skills

The confusion between communication competence and communication performance, which we have noted above, has led to the current confusion in the field between communication competence and communication skills. The "back to basics" movement has led many to argue that what we must teach is specific communication skills. Competence in active listening then becomes, for example, being able to nod and smile while another person is talking, whether one knows why they should nod and smile or not. While teaching of such skills, and conducting research to determine what skills are of importance, is extremely important, we need to make a clear distinction between communication competence and communication skill, since both have an ultimate bearing on performance behavior.

As we have indicated previously, we favor the Larson et. al. definition of communication competence: "the ability of an individual to demonstrate knowledge of the appropriate communicative behavior in a given situation."[11] In the same mode we prefer to define communication skill as: "the ability of an individual to perform appropriate communicative behavior in a given situation."

It is important to stress that our definition of communication skill focuses on the ability of a person to engage in particular behaviors. The question is whether the person can do it, not whether they always do do it.[12] From our view, then, a person can be skilled communicator, as well as a competent communicator, without consistently engaging in behaviors that could be described as either skilled or competent. This is the key to the usefullness of our definitional distinction. When placed within the context of contemporary approaches to learning, this usefullness should become clear.

Domains of Communication Learning

The goal of instruction in communication, whether it be concerned with communication in organizations, interpersonal communication, public speaking, technical writing, television production, teacher-student communication, or any other sub-area, is to enable the learner to be more effective in her/his communicative encounters in the future than in the past. The implicit value underlying our field is that such improved communication will be beneficial not only to the individual learner but also to the society as a whole. For either the learner or the society to derive the intended benefits, therefore, it is essential that the learner not only acquire the competence and skill taught but also employ what is learned subsequently. Ultimate behavior, then, is our goal. Scholars in the field of learning have identified the elements in the learning process that bear directly on ultimate behavioral choices of learners. These three elements are known as the domains of learning, cognitive, psychomotor, and affective. Let us examine each of these within the context of learning about communication.

Cognitive Communication Learning

The cognitive domain of learning is concerned with knowledge and understanding. At the lowest level this domain focuses on specific facts. Within the field of communication such things as definitions of communication variables, culturally based nonverbal communication norms, and historical events in the development of the broadcast media are illustrative of this level. At the middle level the cognitive domain focuses on principles and generalizations. In this field the principle of homophily, the relationship between credibility and attitude change, and impact of television on viewer behavior are illustrative. At the highest level of cognitive learning, the focus is on synthesis and evaluation based on learning at the lower cognitive levels. Illustrations in communication include such things as analyzing an audience, determining an appropriate response to another's interaction behavior, and selecting appropriate appeals to include in an advertisement.

This domain of learning encompasses the entire "content" of the field. In Aristotle's framework it would include learning what are the available means, how they have been employed in various situations in the past, and being able to determine which ones have the highest probability of success in a given situation. In short, this is the domain of communication competence.

Psychomotor Communication Learning

The psychomotor domain of learning is concerned with behavioral skills. Within the field of communication such things as being able to produce a grammatically correct sentence, to produce the phonemes of the language, speaking without excessive vocalized pauses, looking at a receiver in an interaction, and being able to operate a television camera are all illustrative of this domain. In short, this is the domain of communication skill.

Affective Communication Learning

The affective domain of learning is concerned with attitudes and feelings of the learner about the knowledge and behaviors acquired in the other two domains. In most learning environments affective learning is incidental to both cognitive and psychomotor learning. Few teachers, unfortunately, take special

care to design the learning environment so as to produce positive affect. As a result, much of the affective learning that occurs is negative. Students may develop understanding and master behavioral skill but fail to modify their ultimate behavior. In some instances this is the result of poor instruction. In others, the negative affect is produced outside the classroom in other learning environments. For example, the student may learn the components of assertiveness, develop an understanding of when it is needed, and master the specific skills required to be assertive but find when engaging in the behavior outside the classroom that a negative outcome is produced. This can lead to negative affective learning which would inhibit the behavior in the future.

Compared to cognitive and psychomotor learning, affective learning has received little attention in the communication field. An exception is the concern with communication apprehension and shyness.[13] These are affective orientations which have been found to be associated with inappropriate communication behavior in many studies. Recent research by Lustig and King strongly suggests that these behaviors may not always be related to inadequacies in either communication competence or communication skill, but rather may be the product of affective inhibition in people who are both competent and skilled.[14]

Conclusions

Clearly, it is possible for learning related to communication to occur in one domain without corresponding learning in another domain. Just as possible is for learning in more than one domain to occur simultaneously. Both our research and our pedagogy must take these possibilities into account if we are to achieve our goal of modifying ultimate behaviors of learners.

Our research efforts must continue to seek to discover how communication works--to find the "available means" or the "rules," depending on one's methodological orientation. Similarly, we must continue to break down complex communicative behaviors into small component skills that can be learned. In addition, we need to expand our research efforts to identify factors which lead to positive or negative affect toward communication.

Pedagogically our need is to be very clear what we are about. We must avoid the mistakes of other fields, particularly confusing communicative competence with communicative skill. All of the domains of learning bear directly on whether learners will engage in future behavior that we deem appropriate. Some learners need to improve their competence. Some need to develop skills. Others need to alter their communicative orientations and feelings. Accurate diagnosis should precede instruction. Confusing competence and performance and/or ignoring affect will lead to both inaccurate diagnoses and ineffective instruction.

Footnotes

1. For a summary of current thought in the area of oral communication competence, see John M. Wiemann and Philip Backlund, "Current Theory and Research in Communicative Competence," Review of Educational Research, 50 (1980), 185-199.
2. See, for example, James C. McCroskey, "A Summary of Experimental Research in the Effects of Evidence in Persuasive Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 55 (1969), 169-176.
3. See, for example, Lawrence R. Wheeless, "Self-Disclosure and Interpersonal Solidarity: Measurement, Validation, and Relationships," Human Communication Research, 3 (1976), 47-61.
4. See, for example, John M. Wiemann, "Explication and Test of a Model of Communication Competence," Human Communication Research, 3 (1977), 195-213.
5. See, for example, Renira Huxley and Elisabeth Ingram, Language Acquisition: Models and Methods (New York: Academic Press, 1971).
6. Carl E. Larson, Philip M. Backlund, Mark K. Redmond and Alton Barbour, Assessing Communicative Competence (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association and ERIC, 1978), p. 16.
7. Another important term in this definition is "appropriate." The referent for this term in the competence literature is not consistent, and the subject of some controversy. In the context used throughout this essay, "appropriate" is seen as a situational construct. What is appropriate in one situation may not be in another. In a more general sense, a communication behavior is "appropriate" if it is the most likely, or one of the most likely, behavioral choice to lead to a positive outcome. While ideally the appropriateness of such choices should be determined by careful empirical research, at this stage it is necessary to settle for more subjective determinations in most instances.
8. Wiemann, p. 198.
9. Ronald R. Allen and Kenneth L. Brown, Developing Communication Competence in Children (Skokie, IL: National Textbook, 1976), p. 248. Wiemann's agreement with this view is made explicit in Wiemann and Backlund, pp. 188-189.
10. It is important to recognize that judgments of competence can take on either trait-like or situational connotations. In other words, we can judge a person to be competent, a trait-like observation, or we can judge a person's behavior in a specific context to be competent, a situational observation. Our discussion here is intended to apply to both types of judgment.
11. Larson, et. al., p. 16.
12. Our judgments of either competence or skill must be based on observations of overt behavior. Such judgments should be based on carefully controlled situations in which the person to be judged is aware that their competence/skill is to be observed and evaluated, and in circumstances in which the person is motivated to be perceived as competent or skilled. The typical classroom may provide such a setting. Under such circumstances it is possible to determine whether the person can engage in the competent or skilled behavior. It is not possible, however, to judge whether the person will engage in such behavior in later life. Both competence and skill are abilities which are mediated by motivations in everyday life and cannot be expected to be universally manifested in behavior under all circumstances.
13. See, for example, James C. McCroskey, "Oral Communication Apprehension: A Summary of Recent Theory and Research," Human Communication Research, 4 (1977), 78-96, and Phillip G. Zimbardo, Shyness: What It Is and What To Do About It (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1977).
14. Myron W. Lustig and Stephen W. King, "The Effect of Communication Apprehension and Situation on Communication Strategy Choices," Human Communication Research, 7 (1980), 74-82.